DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 124 909 CS 002 755

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TITLE Literature, Language, and Expression.
PUB DATE 76
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Reading Association (21st, Anaheim, California, May 1976)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Childrens Literature; *Creative Expression; Elementary Education; Language Skills; Listening Skills; Literature; Reading Skills; *Teaching Techniques; *Vocabulary Skills; *Writing Skills

ABSTRACT

Recent studies conducted by the National Assessment of Educational Progress indicate a deficiency in youngsters' abilities to express themselves in written form. Described in this paper are techniques for helping elementary school children build writing skills by using literature selections as models for expression. Through imitation, pupils can utilize story patterns provided by literature models to create group stories as well as individual stories and poems. Similarly, literature can provide a model for sentencing, in which children achieve a sense of the structure and sequence of clear communication. Finally, stories and poems can be used to encourage vocabulary development. Specific literature selections and teaching techniques are delineated. (Author/KS)

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LITERATURE, LANGUAGE, AND EXPRESSION

a speech delivered by

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at the International Reading Association Conf.

May 1976

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LITERATURE, LANGUAGE, AND EXPRESSION

Recent studies reported by the National Assessment of Educational Progress indicate a deficiency in youngsters' ability to express themselves in written form. This deficiency extends to problems in sentence structure, paragraph organization, vocabulary, spelling, and usage. I submit to you that in the past we have not done enough to help children handle words on paper. I further submit to you that literature--in which fine writers have handled words skillfully to tell stories and paint word pictures--is a marvelous content for helping children handle words on paper. Attempts by teachers in some schools in New Jersey indicate that it is possible to use literature as a stepping stone into creative expression and into stronger control over story and language patterns without destroying children's pleasurable feelings about literature. Indeed, teachers who have tried what I like to call a literature-language experience approach have found that using literature rather systematically as part of language development and creative expression activity actually heightens children's interest in literature.

In a literature-language experience approach, stories and poems serve as models for children's expression. The models function in four ways. First, literature provides story and poetry patterns for both oral and written composition. Second, literature provides sentence patterns after which young writers model their own. Third, in literature students encounter

language as it is today handled in written form; in this respect stories provide a model against which children check their own written patterns to see that their usage conforms with the conventional. Fourth, literature obviously provides the vocabulary for children to use in their own oral and written expression.

In the remainder of my presentation, I shall elaborate on each of these functions of literature in a literature--language experience approach.

LITERATURE MODELS AS STORY PATTERNS

First, let us consider the story patterns provided by literature models, by focusing on a specific example. Most of you no doubt are familiar with Bernard Waber's delightful picture storybook "You Look Ridiculous," Said the Rhinocerus to the Hippopotamus. I use that book with older students to introduce them to the accumulative, repetitive story framework. As you probably remember, the rhino suggests to the hippo, "You look ridiculous. You don't have a long nose." The hippo takes the rhino's suggestion to heart and goes from one animal in the forest to the next asking, "Do I look ridiculous?" Each in turn tells the hippo that she does indeed look ridiculous, because she does not have spots, a long neck, or whatever depending on who the animal is who offers the advice. Having shared the story with a group, I move to oral composition in which young people together build an accumulative tale that is modeled after the structure of Bernard Waber's. I usually put on a dragon hand

puppet and introduce him to the class as the main character of the story we will compose together, a main character who like the hippo is going to have a problem. First we must name the dragon--for after all stories are more fun if we have a name for our star. Typically, students provide alliterative names, like Douglas Dragon. Then, together we decide on the problem that concerns Douglas. Some youngsters suggest that Doug's problem is a bad toothache--for my dragon head has long projecting teeth that seem to impress children of all ages; others suggest that Doug's problem is that he has lost the art of breathing fire; others suggest that Doug's breath is so fiery that he cannot make friends. As a class we select one problem from all those brainstormed and begin to compose our story. Since ours will be modeled after Waber's and our dragon must solve his problem by asking a series of animals for advice, I provide some assistance at this point by spreading possible animal character slips on the floor--slips naming characters such as blue jay, turtle, giraffe, mite, duck, bear, a second dragon, lion, crow, and so forth. A story maker becomes Doug, selects a card, and speaks the line that expresses his problem. Then the class decides together on the chosen animal's response. We try out several until we arrive at general agreement. We do this several times in succession allowing Doug the Dragon to encounter in our oral story making at least three or four other animals. At this point, I suggest that we anticipate how we intend to end our story, so that our choice of encounters can

lead to a satisfying conclusion. Again we brainstorm possibilities until we achieve a general consensus. At that point, we go back to structuring our story by repeating the problem line and by projecting comments made by each animal still to be met, even as Waber did. Finally we talk out our ending.

Usually our stories are rather funfilled, and we want a copy of what we have created, so someone volunteers to write down the class story for the rest. Here is a story that one group created modeled after Bernard Waber's.

DOUGLAS THE DOWNCAST DRAGON

Once there was a dragon who was called Douglas. Douglas had breath that was so fiery he was not nice to be near. This made Douglas downcast.

Douglas decided to do something about his problem. He set out to find Mr. Giraffe. "Mr. Giraffe," Doug asked, "how can I make my breath nice to be near?"

The giraffe thought for a moment, and then he answered, "Just stretch your neck up like mine. Up here there are not many people who will be near you."

Douglas knew his neck wouldn't stretch so he set out to find Ms. Turtle. "Ms. Turtle," Doug asked, "How can I make my breath nice to be near?"

Ms. Turtle thought for a moment and then she answered, "Just use Scope in the morning, and your breath will be fresh all day."

Douglas knew his breath was so hot that it would boil Scope

so he set out to find King Lion. "King Lion," Doug asked, "how can I make my breath nice to be near?"

King Lion thought for a moment, and then he answered, "Just brush twice a day with Ultrabright so your teeth will be bright and clean smelling all day."

Douglas knew his breath was so hot that it would burn the bristles off a toothbrush so he set out to find Dorothy, the most popular dragon around. "Dorothy," Doug asked, "how can I make my breath nice to be near?"

Dorothy answered immediately, "Haven't you noticed? All dragons have fiery breath. Just stay near the other dragons and you will soon forget that your breath is too hot to be near."

Obviously, other stories can introduce children to the accumulative tale as a pattern for writing. I like "The Three Billy Goats Gruff" for use with the younger crowd and Harve Zemach's The Judge for the older. Literature also provides us with other patterns, such as the classic one about leaving home to encounter any number of adventures in the big world, then to return to the safety of home. You can introduce students to this story pattern for writing through books like Sendak's Where the Wild Things Are, Paul Galdone's The Horse, The Fox, and The Lion, or even "Hansel and Gretel." Still another classic story pattern is the overcoming of three obstacles--a pattern that is an integral part of folk literature. Use George McDermott's recent Arrow to the Sun as

well as Gail Haley's A Story A Story as models for this pattern.

In introducing these patterns as in introducing the accumulative tale, I have found you get the best results by beginning orally by reading the story aloud to a group and involving listeners in follow-up oral composition modeled after the story shared. Only after several oral sessions with the literature pattern will children successfully on their own create original stories in the pattern.

Incidentally, as Kenneth Koch suggests in Red, Where Did You Get That Rose, we can use poetry models in much the same way. Poetry patterns to which fine writers have turned in the past include the talking to animals or objects poem, the talking to yourself poem, the glorification of nature poem, the everything is wrong with the world poem, the deepest confession poem. Upper graders who have encountered Wordsworth's "To the Cuckoo" can write poems in which they address other birds. We funfully call these poems for the birds. Similarly youngsters who have heard Vachel Lindsay's "Sea Fever" write poems in which they talk to themselves, youngsters who have heard W.S. Gilbert's "To the Terrestrial Globe by a Miserable Wretch" can compose an everything is wrong with the world poem, and youngsters who have heard A.E. Housman's "When I Was One and Twenty" can write their own confessionals about things they did when they were younger.

Literature as Models for Sentencing

As I originally noted, literature not only provides us with

story and poetry patterns after which children can model their own stories and poems; it provides us with sentence and language patterns after which student writers can model their own. In this second case, we are using literature not so that children achieve a sense of how stories can be structured, sequenced, and ended but so that children are involved in ways of putting words together to communicate clearly and pleasurably.

Again let me explain through reference to an example. Are you familiar with Pat Hutchin's little book Rosie's Walk? The story line goes something like this:"Rosie the hen went for a walk around the pond, through the fence, across the yard, by the mill, and got home in time for supper." Students have written their own Excursion Tales modeling theirs after the sentence pattern of that short book; one result was simply: Tillie the Witch went for a haunt up to the moon, around the haunted house, through the darkened forest, down goblin's lane and arrived back home in time for Halloween. The students illustrated their version to show an owl hooting ominously in the background in the style of the fox shown only nonverbally in the Hutchin's story. What were these children learning besides enjoying an experience with story? Listen again to the model-sentence pattern of the Hutchin's story: Rosie the Hen went for a walk around the pond, through the fence , across the yard, by the mill. That sentence is basically a series of prepositional phrases; similarly excursion stories children build after the model contain a series of prepositional phrases--

a language pattern not generally seen in children's writing.

A second example: we all know Domanski's version of If All the Seas Were One Sea, a Caldecott honor book. It patterns "If all the seas were one sea, what a great sea that would be...." Youngsters have modeled their pieces after it, pieces like:

If all the peoples were one people,
what a great people that would be.
If all the lands were one land,
what a marvelous land that would be.
If all the nations were one nation,
what a large nation that would be.
And if the great people living in the marvelous land joined as one nation, what a wonderful world that would be.

Another example; a less familiar but equally useful book is Remy Charlip's Fortunately, in which each page begins fortunately and pages between begin unfortunately. Mary Jaye, a kindergarten teacher in South Orange, Maplewood, uses it to encourage her youngsters to dictate story lines in contrasting language patterns. A student in her class dictated this story based on the pattern:

Kathalina started to school.
Unfortunately it was raining.
Fortunately she had an umbrella.

Unfortunately the umbrella was broken.
Fortunately sun came out and there was a rainbow.
Unfortunately the wind came and blew her away.
Fortunately the wind blew her to Florida.
Unfortunately she had no friends in Florida.
Fortunately a family found her.
Unfortunately she was not happy. She missed school.
Fortunately she took a school bus back to school.

Similarly, Eileen Hoernlein's second graders have written poetry-like pieces very tightly modeled after Lucia and James Hymes' "Beans, Bean, Beans". One student wrote "Pickles, Pickles, Pickles":

Pickles
Pickles
Pickles
Fat Pickles
Skinny Pickles
Little, sour, juicy pickles
Those are just a few.
Dill pickles
Hamburger pickles
Sandwich and lunch pickles
All-by-themself pickles
Whopper pickles
Tuna fish pickles
Don't forget teensy pickles
Last of all, best of all,
I like sliced pickles.

Quick study of this piece shows clearly that it patterns after Byrne's. But in modeling, this boy was learning how to handle language, especially descriptive adjectives--something very important in good writing. In like manner, the student modeling after the Charlip story was beginning to handle language patterns that communicate contrasting messages, and the stuuents modeling after If All the Seas..... were working with subordinate clauses and complex sentence patterns--two skills children should acquire through our language-literature program.

Literature as Usage Models

Let us move to my third point--that literature can provide a model against which children check their own patterns of language usage to see that their own conforms with conventional written usage. Again let me clarify my point through an example. Children in a fourth grade class had read to themselves the fable "The Rooster and the Pearl". Rather than asking questions to check children's comprehension of the fable--a technique that might well have killed interest, their teacher used a word and phrase card technique. She had composed a series of cards that when put together summarized "The Rooster and the Pearl." The cards were A rooster, Aha, He, A farmer's wife, She, Well, He, To each his own, he said, pecked happily at his corn, said the rooster, I snatched it up with delight, saw the pearl, picked up the pearl, and, he said, came upon a pearl, here is something to eat, discovered it was not corn, would rather have food than pearls. As you can see by analyzing these words and phrases briefly,

Jeanne Smith had cut up eight sentences, generally dividing each sentence or clause between subject and predicate, but maintaining as units conversational indicators such as he said and said the rooster.

At random, she distributed the cards to the children, and directed, "Hold up your cards so that everyone can see what we have here." Then she asked, '"Who do you think holds a card that could well begin the story of 'The Rooster and the Pearl'? Working from that question and cooperating orally in the endeavor, the young people reconstructed the story from the cards. In so doing, they were forced to juggle pieces already in place, so that the story would flow logically and all pieces fit into the Story Puzzle.

Ms. Smith had the children read the lines of the story aloud, expressing meaning with their voices and pausing where necessary. When they had reread their reconstructed story, one student remarked that the sentences did not have any punctuation to signal the pauses that were needed when reading. These youngsters had been working on punctuation and were developing a conception of the relationship between punctuation and communication of sentence meaning. At that point, Ms. Smith took out her punctuation blocks, small rectangular blocks of wood that she had painted white and on which she had painted commas, periods, question marks, exclamation marks, and quotation marks. Each block held two marks, one on each of two opposite faces. She distributed the punctuation blocks to the participants. One by one the children added

a mark to the sentences laid out on the Composing Stage. Because this was one of the first structured experiences they had had with punctuation of direct quotations, the teacher had to help. She referred the children to the story as written in their reader to discover how to place the comma in relation to the quotation marks at the end of sentences or words spoken. They modeled their punctuation after the way it was done in the story. When all the sentences were punctuated according to conventional written usage, the teacher guided the group to discover generalizations about punctuation of direct quotations based on their reconstructed story.

Eventually these youngsters wrote their own fables, into which they wrote conversations that required use of quotation marks. As these youngsters edited and revised their own stories, they referred back to the story summary cards of "The Rooster and the Pearl" displayed on a bulletin board. These cards now became the readily available model against which they checked their own written usage.

The example of the teaching/learning episode with "The Rooster and The Pearl" suggests how important the choice of literature material is if it is to serve as a model of clear written usage. The teacher of the group knew that part of her reading-literature program was an introduction of the fable form of literature. She also knew that conversation--dialogue, if you will, is an integral part of the fable form, so she decided to integrate the teaching of fable with the teaching of written

conventions associated with dialogue as written on paper. Working with other literature forms and particular stories you can make similar integrations. For example, what a better time to involve young people in study of comparative and superlative forms of adjectives and adverbs than when they are reading and writing tall tales; tall tales are packed with ests and ers as in tallest and taller and mosts and mores as in most fantastic and more fantastic.

Literature and Vocabulary

And now my last point--vocabulary. There is no question that stories and poems can provide children with words to include in their own writing. To encourage vocabulary growth, some teachers ask children to listen closely for words, especially words that have a nice sound and paint a clear picture. Most stories lend themselves to this kind of word emphasis, but one I particularly like for use in grades two through four is The Way the Tiger Walked by Doris Chaconas. Read the story expressively. Children will remember words like beautifully, graceful, muscles, rolling, golden, kingly, strutted. Print out these words on word cards, and give some empty cards to the listeners. Now as children listen again while you reread the story, they watch closely for really expressive words. When they come to one, they raise their hands and a volunteer records that word on his or her card. Soon you will have a stack of really delectable words, words that you can post on the wall over the writing station--a station to which children go to compose original tiger stories. I have seen a teacher successfully scatter tiger word cards on a central area

of classroom floor around which the students were sitting. The youngsters built those words into sentences and story lines by writing out function word cards and combining the word cards. To the youngsters this was a puzzling together time . But in terms of language goals being achieved, it was a learning time, too. First, pupils were developing their functional vocabulary by actually using the words--some of which may have been new to them--in meaningful contexts. In developing vocabulary children must not only learn word meanings but also the contexts and patterns in which we most typically use a word. This is achieved by building original stories from story words. In addition, children were gaining some understanding of the kinds of words that we have in our language. Most of the words written on the cards were nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs--the four major classes of words in the language. The words they had to add when composing sentences were function words like the determiners, verb markers, clause markers, phrase markers. Although in this setting there was no mention of parts of speech, children were working directly with the grammar of their language and later there could be opportunity to think about differences in words encountered.

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Literature, language, and expression--I believe that these should not be discrete elements in elementary language arts programs. As I have attempted to show, literature can be a stepping stone into language and expression, both in oral and

written forms. It can be a stepping stone when story and poem are used as models for overarching story and poetry patterns, as models for sentence patterns after which youngsters structure their own, and as models of acceptable written form against which student writers check their usage during editing and revision. It can be a stepping stone into new vocabulary for children to draw upon as they write.

Yes, we do want children to appreciate fine literature! That is one goal toward which we strive, but can we not use literature as a bridge to achieve language and expression goals? The experiences of teachers who are trying these techniques seem to suggest that there is validity in a literature/language experience approach.